



There's been a fair amount of speculation recently that some winemakers have changed the flavor profile of their wines to please the fickle palates of equally fickle critics. Do the critics rate wines they personally prefer differently to those they like less? Certainly Parker and others have been accused of favoring bolder flavored wines (known as "fruit-bombs") more than others. Is this true? I don't know. I can tell you I have tremendous respect for the man's palate. I attended a tasting where he was judging a ten-year vertical of Latour and I was blown away by his recall ability as he described wines he tasted more than a decade earlier with pinpoint accuracy.

For better or worse, ratings have become a necessary evil. The real tragedy though is that the majority of wines never get rated and even those that score in the mid to high 80's - delicious, well-made wines, may get scant notice.



So, do ratings help consumers? Yes, in the end I suppose they do. Without some guidance from experts, most consumers would be more lost than ever as they wander aimlessly up and down the wine aisles pondering hundreds, and in some cases thousands, of labels from which to choose. Make no mistake, people who taste and evaluate wines for a living provide a valuable service to their wine constituents. But, and this for me is a big *BUT*, consumers need not always follow the handful of "experts" whose palates, while experienced, are subjective and yes, sometimes even fallible.

Are they always accurate in the evaluations, scores and descriptions of the wines they review? Certainly not if you listen to the protestations of critics of, well, the critics. In a controlled scientific study of a wine judging, a highly respected not-for profit wine community recently concluded that successive judgments of the same wine, by the same wine expert, varied so widely that ratings are "seriously flawed." One study found that over a three year period, 90% of the judges in a blind tasting, repeatedly gave widely different scores to the same wine, and in one case, twice rejected a particular wine only to award it a Gold medal on the third tasting,

Two other stories circulating in the nay-sayer's camp involve a tasting where varying levels of coloring agents were added to a white wine to simulate different red wine varietals and critics proceeded to "identify" what they thought were the correct red wines. Then there was the story of a researcher who put an identical wine in two different bottles, one labeled as an expensive Grand Cru Bordeaux, the other in a bottle regarded as a cheap table wine. Fifty-seven experts rated the Grand Cru as excellent and the cheap table wine as unbalanced and flat!

With all the accusations, blemishes and shortcomings of the rating system, you'd think the wine buying public would be more than willing to ignore the reviews and ratings. In truth, 90-plus point scores are relished more than ever, even as most wine lovers publicly profess to care less what the critics say. At least until the point of buying. Then Parker weighs as heavily on their wine buying decision as does price. We're all looking for value, but not at the expense of low - or worse, no scores. I wonder how many read the recent Wall Street Journal story suggesting that a one point rise in a Parker score equates to something like a 7% increase in price?

The most valuable lesson I ever learned about ratings came from a merchant, a wine buyer for five decades, who claims to have developed the perfect rating system. He doesn't allow the wholesalers who call on him to discuss the "experts" ratings until after he has personally tasted the wines. He then applies his own two-point scoring system. One if he likes it. Two if he doesn't! I've never bought a bad bottle from this guy.

*Eat, drink, and be merry!*

*Bruce*